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ABSTRACT

This study examines the historical understanding of 22 fourth-graders and 11 fifth-grade students in two classrooms in a suburban community near Cincinnati (Ohio). The classes were homogeneous racially, with no students of Hispanic, African-American, Asian, or Pacific Island descent in either class. The school reflects primarily middle and upper-middle income families. Data were collected through participant observation, open-ended interviews with 29 different students, and analysis of 278 written compositions. The classrooms studied were innovative with activity-oriented instruction. A consistent feature of students' historical thinking was their tendency to explain all historical events and trends in terms of the attitudes and intentions of individuals. Consistent with research on children's understanding of economics and politics, these students did not understand the roles of political or economic institutions in history. This research suggests that exposing elementary students to increased historical content is unlikely to be effective unless instruction also focuses on helping students understand societal institutions and forces. (EH)

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History is about people:

Elementary students' understanding of history

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Abstract

This study examined the historical understanding of students in two elementary classrooms. Data was collected through approximately ninety hours of participant observation, thirty–three open–ended interviews with twenty–nine different students, and the analysis of 278 written compositions. A consistent feature of students' historical thinking was their tendency to explain all historical events and trends in terms of the attitudes and intentions of individuals. Consistent with research on children's understanding of economics and politics, these students did not understand the role of political or economic institutions in history. This research suggests that exposing elementary students to increased historical content is unlikely to be effective unless instruction also focuses on helping students understand societal institutions and forces.

History is about people:

Elementary students' understanding of history

The last decade has seen numerous calls to increase the amount of history taught in the elementary grades (Bradley Commission on History in Schools, 1989; Cheney, 1987; Crabtree, 1989; Hirsch, 1987; Ravitch, 1987); such proposals have received further support from the recently–issued National Standards in U. S. History, which recommend that extensive historical content be taught throughout the elementary grades (National History Standards Project, 1994). Presumably, any attempt to teach history to children must begin with an understanding of the way they make sense of the topic; but although impressive achievements have been made in examining the content of students' conceptions in fields like mathematics and science, research on their knowledge and understanding of history is still very preliminary—particularly at the elementary level.

Although the burgeoning number of studies investigating historical thinking consistently find that even young children know about and are interested in the subject (Barton and Levstik, 1994; Brophy, VanSledright, and Bredin, 1992, 1993; Downey, 1994; Levstik and Barton, 1994; Levstik and Pappas, 1987; McKeown and Beck, 1990), few investigators have reached any firm conclusions regarding the structure of such thought; aside from the observation that narrative and storytelling seem to be important features for younger students (Levstik, 1986, 1989; VanSledright and Brophy, 1992), there is little consensus on the patterns or organizing structures of children's historical thinking. Indeed, McKeown and Beck (1990) refer to fifth– and sixth–graders' knowledge of the American Revolution as consisting of "simple associations and a lack of connected structures" (p. 719). Brophy, VanSledright and Bredin (1993) similarly point to "only spotty knowledge" and "bits and pieces of information" that are "not yet subsumed within a systematic network of knowledge" (p. 2).

In this study, I came to somewhat different conclusions. I examined historical thinking through an extensive qualitative investigation of the students in a fourth –and a fourth/fifth–grade classroom, and found more explicit structuring patterns than most previous research has indicated. The students in this study knew a great deal about how things had changed over time, saw themselves as interested in history, and were actively involved in creating a narrative of historical development. For these students, however, history was concerned almost exclusively with one topic—people. They were most interested in history that dealt with themselves, the everyday life of ordinary people, or how people were treated under extreme circumstances. Most importantly, students did not understand the role of political or economic systems in history, but looked solely to individual intentions in their attempts to understand the past; this finding is consistent with research on both political socialization and children's understanding of economics, and has significant implications for the design of instruction. It is this aspect of children's historical thinking—their tendency to explain historical developments solely in terms of the actions and intentions of individuals—that forms the focus of this paper.

Design of the Study

I conducted this research in the classrooms of Amy Leigh and Tina Reynolds, two teachers who had been recommended to me for their innovative and activity–oriented instruction.[1] Theirs was one of three elementary schools located in a suburban community near Cincinnati. The town has been incorporated since the middle of the nineteenth century, and currently consists primarily of stable residential neighborhoods; many families have lived there for several generations. Amy, who grew up and still lives in the community,

[1]With their consent, I have used the teachers' real names. All students' names have been replaced with pseudonyms to protect their privacy and that of their families.

described it as "very family– and school–oriented." The vast majority of residents are Euro–Americans, and the community has a well–deserved reputation for consisting primarily of well–educated, middle and upper–middle income families. The range of socioeconomic backgrounds, however, is very wide, since the town includes several small public housing projects. Both teachers described the school as having a high level of parental involvement and support, and Tina observed that such involvement was characteristic of the entire range of economic backgrounds. The overall academic achievement of students was extraordinarily high, and the school scored among the top ten in the state during each of the first two years of the state's new testing program (the two years previous to this study).

Amy's and Tina's classes reflected the racial and socioeconomic makeup of the community. The classes were very homogenous racially, and there were no students of Hispanic, African–American, Asian, or Pacific Island descent in either class. The predominance of Euro–Americans, however, masked some of the diversity of national and ethnic origins of students' families: both classes mirrored the high proportion of families of German descent in the region, and other students' families had surnames reflecting their origins in Ireland, England, Italy, or other European countries. Some families still identified strongly with these origins, although all had been residents of the United States since at least their great–grandparents' generation. Like many people in this region of the country, several students also knew of specific Native Americans in their ancestry. Slightly more than ten percent of the students in these classes lived in public housing, but the socioeconomic background of most other students was high: a large portion had parents with college degrees and jobs in professional or managerial fields—including executives, teachers, business consultants, engineers, and nurses. Many other parents (especially mothers) worked in clerical or service fields.

Both Amy and Tina described their classrooms as including students with a range of academic abilities, but they considered most to be average or above average academically. Amy's class in particular consisted almost entirely of students whom she described as having high levels of both ability and achievement; Tina considered her class to contain a wider range of students—including several who had serious problems with reading and written composition—but characterized several students as having exceptional academic abilities. Both also thought the enthusiasm, motivation, and interest of most students was very high; based on my own background as a teacher, I considered students in both classes to have a very high level of motivation, as they were eager to learn, stayed on task, and conscientiously completed homework assignments.

Amy's and Tina's teaching provided extensive opportunities for insight into their students' historical thinking. Both considered themselves interested in history, and both devoted a great deal of time to the topic—history projects and discussions, in fact, often spilled over into other times of the day. Neither used textbooks, and instead conveyed content through tradebooks and their own explanations, combined with student–centered projects, role plays and simulations, and open–ended writing assignments. Their teaching accorded well with the general principles of effective subject–matter instruction identified by Prawat (1989) and Good and Brophy (1994). Rather than attempting to cover a large amount of miscellaneous information and expecting students to remember isolated facts, for example, Amy and Tina took time to plan sustained instruction in a few topics which they considered important. In addition, Amy and Tina consistently engaged in interactive scaffolding of students' learning. Rarely, for example, did they tell students exactly what to do or how to do it; rather, they used questions to help students develop and improve their own assignments. Both Amy and Tina also encouraged class and small–group discussion, and expected students to respond thoughtfully to their questions and to each other.

During the course of the year, students engaged in a wide variety of instructional activities related to several historical topics. At the beginning of the year, for example, students collected information on their personal histories and developed timelines and presentations about their lives. They also spent several weeks working in groups to investigate changes in aspects of everyday life (sports, work, household technology, cars, etc.) through the use of books, artifacts, and interviews. Students also studied topics such as the Salem witch trials, the French and Indian Wars, daily life in the Colonial Era, the American Revolution, and immigration to the United States at the turn of this century. Studying most of these topics included the use of tradebooks, primary sources, role plays and simulations, presentations to classmates, and written compositions (often written from the perspective of people alive at the time).

Other topics in history came up throughout the year outside the time set aside for formal history instruction. Near the Martin Luther King, Jr., holiday, for example, both classes watched and discussed a video on the history of the Civil Rights movement. Historical fiction was also a prevalent part of students' reading experience. The fifth-graders in Amy's class read both *The Sign of the Beaver* (Speare, 1983) and *Goodnight Mr. Tom* (Magoriam, 1986) as part of their study of literature, for example, and Tina's class read *The Cay* (Taylor, 1969). Throughout the year, I frequently noticed students reading historical fiction independently.

In order to investigate students' historical thinking, I used three principal techniques—interviews with students (both formal semi-structured interviews and informal discussions), classroom observation and participation (including frequent discussions with Amy and Tina regarding what students knew and were able to do), and analysis of students' written assignments. By combining these methods, I was able to examine students' understanding in a wide range of contexts and with reference to many different specific topics.

Formal, open–ended interviews with students were an important component of the study.[2] I began interviews by showing students a series of pictures from different periods in American history and asking them to put them in order and to talk about the reasons for their placement. I then asked them a series of questions about their understanding of history and about what they had done in class during the year. (The appendix contains a full description of the task, including interview questions and descriptions of the pictures.) Previous research with a similar task (Barton and Levstik, 1994; Levstik and Barton, 1994) indicated that such pictures were helpful in eliciting students' historical knowledge, and were useful as a sort of "warm up" to more conceptual questions about history.

I interviewed all students in groups of two.[3] I conducted four different series of interviews—the first during August and September, the second during November and December, the third in February, and the fourth in April and May. Although I had initially anticipated interviewing only eight fourth–graders and four fifth–graders—each of them three times over the course of the year—the number of students who returned parental consent forms and their enthusiastic expectation of being interviewed led me to interview each of them at least once. I thus ultimately interviewed thirty–three students (twenty–two

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[2]Most research on children's historical knowledge and understanding has relied on semi–structured interview formats, which often consist of asking students open–ended questions (about either specific topics in history or the nature of history itself), sometimes after an initial task involving written text or other documents. Such interviews have a number of very important strengths. By beginning with a structured set of questions, of course, they allow the researcher to compare the responses of students in order to identify overall patterns. But like clinical interviews in the Piagetian tradition, they also allow the interviewer to probe answers in an effort to get at the thinking behind initial responses. The open–ended nature of such interviews also allows the researcher to follow up on unanticipated topics or ideas raised by students, rather than forcing consideration only of a limited set of content.

[3]My own previous work with both individual and group interviews had convinced me of the advantage of talking to more than one student at a time, since it allowed students to discuss and respond to each other's ideas and thereby resulted in more in–depth responses than individual interviews (cf. Ashby and Lee, 1987; Seixas, 1993). Although interviewing an even larger group of students might have provided more extensive discussion, my experience had also convinced me that the number of overlapping comments and the difficulty of identifying individual speakers makes such interviews extremely difficult to transcribe and analyze. Interviewing students in pairs thus represented a compromise between the maximum amount of discussion and the maximum ease of transcription.

fourth–graders and eleven fifth–graders)—eleven of them three times each, three of them twice, and nineteen of them once—during a total of twenty–nine interviews.[4]

In addition to interviews, I observed extensively in each classroom; doing so allowed me to ask much more specific questions, and provided insight into how students' responses related to what they had heard or read in class. The chief advantage of participant observation was that it allowed me to observe students in a much wider range of contexts than interviews alone could have done. Rather than seeing only their responses to my artificial stimuli in interviews, I was able to watch and talk with students as they engaged in their everyday classroom activities. Because students engaged in so many group projects, and because Amy and Tina actively encouraged open–ended, thoughtful discussion of topics, my presence in the classroom provided me with innumerable opportunities to record informal and spontaneous comments by students.[5]

I observed on sixty–three occasions—beginning in August and continuing until March (the last time during the year when formal instruction was devoted to history)—for a total of approximately ninety hours. (This total does not include time spent in interviews.) History was typically scheduled for an hour a day, three days a week, and I tried always to be there at the times it was scheduled; over the course of the year, I attended approximately eighty percent of the class sessions devoted to history. Special projects often began earlier

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[4] The gender imbalance among fourth–graders in these classes—combined with the expectation of most of them that they would be interviewed—led to a greater proportion of males being interviewed. The fourth–grade included twenty–one boys and only eight girls, and I conducted interviews with fifteen boys and seven girls. (The fifth grade included six girls and five boys, and I interviewed each of them.) The proportion of boys and girls in fourth grade who were interviewed multiple times, however, was more nearly equal: I interviewed four girls and five boys more than once. (Among fifth–graders, I interviewed three girls and two boys more than once.)

[5] While educational researchers often take the role of *non*participant observers who attempt to position themselves unobtrusively and not to interfere in instruction, I explicitly took a much more active role. In addition to working with Amy and Tina to plan lessons and locate resources, I frequently taught or cotaught lessons in one class or the other, and even more frequently interjected comments, questions, and observations while Amy and Tina were teaching—a practice which they actively encouraged and which fit well with the discussion–oriented nature of their instruction and with the generally open feeling of their classes. When students were engaged in individual or group work I often took on the same role as Amy and Tina—probing students' understanding, asking them questions about the way they carried out the assignment, and providing them with the help they needed.

or extended later than scheduled, and I tried to remain for those times whenever possible. I also accompanied the classes on three field trips related to history.

In addition to analyzing fieldnotes and interview transcripts, I read a total of 278 written compositions that students produced as part of their regular classroom instruction. Both Amy and Tina gave frequent written assignments in history; most importantly, since these assignments were designed to prepare students for the state's assessment program—which included writing portfolios and open-ended questions in history—they were not of the traditional "fill in the blank" or "answer the questions at the end of the chapter" variety. Instead, assignments usually asked students to draw conclusions supported by evidence (for example, "How has the United States changed over the last 200 years?") or to put themselves in the place of people in history (for example, by writing a letter to a magistrate in Salem protesting a family member's innocence of witchcraft).

The primary advantage of analyzing students' writing was that it provided insight into the ideas of students who did not talk frequently during class. Although the level of participation in class and small-group discussions was high, some students (particularly in Tina's room) chose to speak rarely or never. Even when Tina and I tried to draw them into class discussion, their responses were characteristically brief and superficial. Other students, of course, spoke very frequently and had ideas on every question raised. Reading students' compositions provided some corrective to this inequity and enabled me to make sure that relying on more talkative students had not substantially biased my conclusions regarding students' thinking.

Individual Intentions and Actions

Throughout the year, students showed little understanding of the way historical events were shaped by social institutions such as government or the economy. Rather, they

conceptualized every topic solely in terms of the actions and intentions of individuals. In explaining why things have changed over time, for example, students invariably pointed to the efforts of individuals, especially famous ones. Brandon, for instance, said that machines had changed "because we have more technology, since Thomas Edison and everything has come along, they didn't have that back then." Charles said that transportation had changed over time "because a person invented the car and everything," and Susan also thought that cars had changed because "someone came into the world, and they were smart, and they just thought that [a picture of an old car] wasn't enough car, like you could only carry two people, so they thought it wasn't enough, or they thought it was just too hard to drive." And Brett noted that baseball used to be played without gloves, but since the ball could hurt your hand, "a smart person came up with gloves."

In explaining why these inventions arose, students did not look to broader economic or social changes, but only to the motivations of individuals. Dwayne, for example, thought that things change "because they're just like, inventing new, trying to invent new things so they could be rich." Similarly, Travis said that things have changed "cause there's been a lot of like inventors, and like lazy people—not that I'm calling inventors lazy people, but they just want life to be easier—so they try to invent easier ways of doing things, I don't blame them, but..." Curtis provided one of the few exceptions to this belief that technological developments can be attributed to the discrete efforts of particularly smart individuals: when I asked him what he wondered about in history, he said, "Cars and stuff, I still wonder how they came up with the idea of them, because it's like, one person didn't just say, 'Hey, let's make a car today,' or anything like that."

Just as they did with technological changes, students often attributed changes in the treatment of African–Americans to the efforts of famous people. Susan, for example, said that slavery ended "because Abraham Lincoln changed it," Jean pointed out that "Abraham Lincoln set them free, and now we like them much better," and Curtis said that Lincoln

"was trying to get the blacks to stop being slaves and stuff." (Brandon even suggested that Lincoln was responsible for women's getting the right to vote.) Students also often mentioned Martin Luther King as having brought about these changes. In the following interview (conducted at the beginning of the year), Kenny and Kathy explicitly address the role of famous people in bringing about changes in attitudes.

Kenny: Now, women and men can have just as good as jobs [...]

Interviewer: Okay, why do you think that changed?

Kenny: I think women have gotten more rights.

Kathy: Just because people have

Kenny: People

Kathy: It's not fair to them.

Kenny: We found out it's not fair to women to stay at home and do all the work, while the men go to work and get paid for it [inaudible]. Now the father and mother both can work with jobs, and get more money.

Interviewer: So why do you think people decided that it wasn't fair? Why do you think that now people think that's not fair, and a long time ago

Kathy: Because they used to treat black people like that.

Kenny: Un-hunh.

Kathy: Till Martin Luther King came along, and he stopped that.

Kenny: And now there are people like Martin Luther King, but for women's rights.

Kathy: Yeah.

Interviewer: Why do you think there are people like that now, and there weren't a long time ago?

Kenny: I think some people, presidents, Abraham Lincoln, people have changed that over the years.

Kathy: Yeah, un-hunh.

Kenny: Important people, famous people, have changed that over the years, and given other people their rights.

Kathy: Yeah.

Similarly, during another interview Michael had explained how blacks were treated differently in the past, and in the following passage he and Dwayne explain why that has changed:

Interviewer: So you think that's something that's changed over time?

Michael: Yeah.

Interviewer: Why do you think that's changed?

Michael: Martin Luther King.

Dwayne: And just the presidents.

Interviewer: What do you mean?

Dwayne: Like they make change, like what's best for the world.

Michael: Except for Clinton, he raises taxes.

Nichole also pointed to the influence of Martin Luther King: "Well, he said a speech, and then everybody started realizing that the black people were the same as them—and they thought they were just animals and stuff—and they started realizing that they were the same as them, they needed to treat them how they would want to be treated, they have feelings and all that stuff too. Kathy even suggested that Martin Luther King was responsible for changes in women's rights: "He probably changed it, because black people didn't have rights, and the women didn't have rights either."

Students explained not only changes in rights, but the entire area of race and gender relations in terms of individual attitudes. Kenny observed that "people wanted other

people to do their work, because they started getting lazy, they got black people, since they thought black people weren't as good as white people and that, they wouldn't give them very good clothing or food or anything, and then they would have to do their work, for the white people." Similarly, Tonya noted that blacks were slaves because "the white people were being greedy," and Laura thought women were treated differently in the past "cause men would not share." Mandy also thought that women were treated differently because men "were bossier, like they made the women do stuff that the men should do also."

When they tried to explain specific events in the past, students also looked principally to the involvement of individuals with each other. When asked to predict the result of French and English expansion in North America, for example, several students thought they would get into a war because they "didn't like each other that much"; Kathy thought they would be mad at each other because they didn't understand each other's language. One student who was cast as an English settler during a role play noted that the English wanted more land "so we can build more houses back in England, and buy jewels from the king and queen." And Tina and I both noticed how frequently students referred to the different sides as "teams."

The tendency to explain events with reference to the attitudes and intentions of individuals was clearest during the class activities surrounding the American Revolution. In Tina's class in particular (where I spent most of my time during this portion of the year), students displayed little or no interest in or understanding of issues of taxation, representation, or the relationship between England and the colonies; they interpreted the entire conflict as a contest of wills between individuals who were upset that they were not getting their way. As Nichole said in an interview, "if those people wouldn't've fought for us, and got our freedom, we'd still be bossed around by the queen and stuff."

When Tina and I first began to explain the events leading up to the American Revolution, students showed essentially no interest in explanations of taxation and

representation; they were very interested, however, in hearing about how colonists threw rocks and yelled insults at British soldiers, and how they dressed up as Indians and dumped tea. (They were also very thankful when we eventually stopped bothering them with topics like representation and started reading books about people who lived during the Revolutionary Era.) Moreover, we quickly realized that students had no understanding of what taxes are, who establishes them, how they are collected, or for what they are used.[6] After several days of discussion, explanation, and simulations on the topic of taxation, most students developed a basic understanding of what taxes are and of the fact that England increased taxes on the colonies in order to pay for the French and Indian War. Students still failed to understand, however, why the colonists were upset about these taxes. During her explanation of taxation, Tina had showed students a page of illustrations on the topic from an encyclopedia; these included a cartoon of a woman beating a Colonial tax collector with a broom, and this image seemed to provide students with their central understanding of the conflict over taxation. Students consistently maintained that colonists did not like the taxes because the tax collectors came and surprised them in their homes. Despite Tina's and my repeated assertions to the contrary, many students adamantly maintained that colonists were upset because they weren't given enough warning that they would have to pay taxes.

In trying to help students understand why people today pay their taxes without starting a war, Tina and I emphasized that we elect the people who make the laws governing taxation, and the colonists could not do so. Students' understanding of what

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[6] This first became clear when Tina began a chart comparing what taxes are used for now, and what they would have been used for in the colonial era. The first student who volunteered gave examples of how taxes were used to build roads and pay teachers; the other students then decided that taxes were used to pay for *all* building and to pay *all* salaries. They had no understanding of the relationship between government and taxation, and did not realize that the price they pay for an item at a store goes partly to pay suppliers, partly to pay taxes, and partly for profit. Many students, for example, thought that stores decide how much the tax will be, and there was no evidence that any students understood the concept of profit. Students also had great difficulty differentiating between private businesses and government institutions such as libraries or police departments.

government is and how people are elected was as undeveloped as their understanding of taxation; but again, after days of explanation and discussion, they developed a basic understanding of how legislators are elected and how laws are made.[7] Nonetheless, many students held fast to their belief that people today don't object to taxes as strongly as the colonists did because now they know that they will have to pay, and have time to prepare. Several others—perhaps convinced by Tina's and my assertions that that had nothing to do with it—thought that the key problem with taxation in the colonies was that taxes were too high, and the colonists didn't have the money to pay them; as Charles said, "People pay taxes now because they're not coming around and taking your most valuable things."

Even though we were successful in explaining both taxation and representation to students, our explanations of the relationship between the two in the Colonial context had little impact on them. When they met in small groups to prepare for a debate on the topic, students on both sides of the issue consistently failed to consider the importance of representation, and displayed no understanding of the governmental relationship between England and the colonies. The Colonial side in the debate, for example, simply tried to come up with excuses why they should not have to pay taxes—such as, "They fought the war, why should we have to pay?"—almost as though they were trying to get out of chores around the house. Similarly, the British side could not imagine what the colonists would say, other than that the taxes were too high. Once I convinced them (superficially, at least), that the colonists would be upset because they could not vote, students on the British side decided they would just let them.

Similarly, Tina said it took her a long time to convince the Colonial group that they needed to focus on the issue of representation; they planned simply to tell the British that they would pay off what they owed in monthly amounts, and then they were going to be

[7] Although students had heard of Congress, they had no idea what it was; many believed that laws are made by the president, and that members of Congress are appointed by the president to "help him." One student even thought that the president is elected as the direct result of televised debates.

their own country. When I began to work with that group, I asked them what they were going to do when the British told them they couldn't just be their own country. They obviously had not thought about that possibility, and were adamant that the British could not do that. Gary, for example, said, "We're in charge of our own stuff!" When I explained to them that in fact the British were in charge, and were in a position to say the colonies could not become their own country, students refused to accept it; they seemed to think that England was just some kind of a big bully. Brandon explained, "They're not in charge of us!" Kathy explained that they would tell them, "We don't care about your reasons, we're going to go off and make our own government."

Although Tina and I thought we had made progress in helping students understand the relationship between representation and taxation during these planning sessions, once the debate started students demonstrated little such comprehension. The debate itself amounted to little more than one side saying, "We don't want to pay," and the other saying, "You have to." In Amy's class as well, the debate was little more than a contest of wills, and had the unmistakable tone of an argument between children and their parents. The colonists, for example, maintained they didn't want the protection of British troops, so they shouldn't have to pay for it. John (representing the British), asked the colonists, "Why did you leave in the first place?" and received the following series of responses:

Jenny: Cause you let us leave, so it's your fault if you're made at us now.

Jesse: We wanted to have freedom from you guys.

Nichole: But we got more taxes.

Travis: That's why we left, because we didn't want taxes on our tea.

Darren: We still are part of your country, but we want to be independent. You wouldn't want your mom hanging around all the time.

Jenny: How would you feel if someone took all your money and gave it away, and you wouldn't have money to buy food?

The debates took place independently in the two classrooms, and both Amy and Tina were surprised by students' lack of attention to the political issues involved. Amy interrupted the debate in her room to explain to students just how far off base their arguments were (something I never saw her do on any other occasion), and Tina ended her students' debate before they were ready to quit because it obviously was going nowhere.

Discussion

Research consistently shows that elementary students have little understanding of political institutions and economic systems. Research on the political socialization of children, for example, has repeatedly found that although they widely recognize the president and various political symbols (such as the flag and George Washington), they have little understanding—particularly before fifth grade—of political parties, taxes, the legislative and judicial branches of the government, or the difference between governmental and nongovernmental institutions (Easton and Dennis, 1969; Greenstein, 1969; Hess and Torney, 1967; Moore, Lave, and Wagner, 1985). Similarly, research on students' economic understanding indicates that before age eleven, students do not understand how wages or prices are arrived at, and do not understand how money flows through commercial exchanges; they often fail to understand, for example, what happens to the money paid for goods in a store, and think of banks as simple storage places for coins and bills (Berti and Bombi, 1988; Jahoda, 1984). Furth (1980) describes the development of children's thinking about such social institutions as a move from personal to societal thinking: younger children confuse personal and social roles, think of societal events as the result of the personal wishes of individuals, and have no understanding of government or community, while older children come to see the societal life of a community as an interrelated whole with institutions, roles, and customs. Furth argues that most children at

ages nine and ten (the age of most students in this study) still have an incomplete understanding of the societal aspects of human life.[8]

If students have little understanding of social institutions, then it is not surprising that they would interpret historical developments in terms of personalized factors. Indeed, Halldén found in his observations of a Swedish secondary classroom (Halldén, 1986, 1994) that even older students explained historical events by examining the possible motives individuals had for their actions, and were impervious to other types of explanations. Despite the fact that instruction in the class Halldén observed focused on social forces and institutions, students interpreted information only at the level of the actions and motives of individuals. Similarly, Carretero et al. (in press) found that both sixth– and eighth–graders were more likely to identify intentional, personal factors than structural, political, or economic forces in explaining historic events.

While Halldén and Carretero explicitly identify the role of personalized explanations, the drawbacks in children's historical understanding identified by other researchers can also be understood most easily as the result of children's concern with people rather than social institutions or forces. What McKeown and Beck (1994), for example, refer to as "surface" narratives are actually transformations of a political narrative into a personal one: students read about "no taxation without representation," but interpreted their reading in terms of colonists getting angry, a British colonel being strong, the king ending taxes, and people "quieting down." Just as students in Tina's class did, those McKeown and Beck interviewed focused on individual actions and intentions rather than on political and economic structures and processes. Similarly, Britt et al. (1994) found that one of the most common problems in students' retelling of the building of the Panama

[8] Vansina (1980) reports similar observations among a number of groups in eastern Africa; she notes that although children by age ten understand individual kinship relations and the corresponding appropriate behaviors, they do not fully understand the economic, political, and ritual relations among kinship groups until approximately age fifteen.

Canal was that they focused on a "substory" of the passage they had read rather than the "main story"—yet every single student told one specific substory, that of how workers overcame disease; the main story that they failed to tell, meanwhile, was about how the United States received permission to build the Canal. Clearly this was not a simple reading problem, as Britt et al. imply: students did not simply miss the main point, they interpreted the text the way they understand history—by ignoring political institutions and focusing on individual actions and intentions.

Conclusions

Throughout the year, students demonstrated little understanding of the role of societal institutions in shaping historical developments; instead, they looked solely to individual actions and intentions to explain what happened in the past. In explaining technological changes, for example, students pointed to the actions and motivations of individual inventors, and had no sense of how those efforts related to the wider economic system; similarly, students saw changes in the treatment of women and minorities as being a matter of changes in individual attitudes, not as something that involved economic, political, or religious institutions. Moreover, students explicitly pointed to the role of individuals in bringing about changes in these areas of life—crediting Martin Luther King or Lincoln, for example, with single-handedly effecting an end to discrimination.

The clearest example of students' lack of attention to institutional factors in human history arose during their study of the American Revolution. Despite constant attention by Amy, Tina, and myself to the underlying cause of the conflict, most students appeared to have little understanding of the significance of representation or taxation. Students in Tina's room, for example, consistently believed that the problem lay either in the amount of the taxes or the fact that the colonists weren't expecting them; they failed to understand that the

colonists were upset that they couldn't elect representatives to Parliament. Similarly, students in both classes did not understand the governmental relationship between Britain and the colonies; their central understanding of the era was well–summarized by a student who explained that the queen was bossing us around. This focus on personal rather than institutional factors accords well with research indicating the undeveloped nature of elementary children's understanding of political and economic institutions.

This is not to say, however, that students' lack of attention to such factors was some kind of developmental, cognitive constraint. Both Tina and I thought that our sustained attention to the meaning of taxation and representation resulted in substantial improvement in students' understanding of those topics, and we certainly saw no indication that they were incapable of understanding them. What this research indicates, however, is that students did not come to school with any significant prior understanding of these topics. In addition, students rarely turned to institutional factors in attempting to explain historical events or changes; when discussing the reasons for change over time, for example, students completely ignored such issues, and even when instruction explicitly addressed politics or economics—as with the American Revolution—students had difficulty applying such concepts.

Most proposals for the increase of historical content in the elementary grades, however, focus precisely on the kinds of institutional forces and factors—whether political, economic, religious, or cultural—which these students had the most trouble understanding. Of course, all are important forces in American history, and probably no one would maintain that students should not study them. Students' limited understanding of the legal and political basis of changes in the status of women and minorities, for example, certainly points to their need to understand forces beyond simple prejudice. But what this research indicates is that simply increasing the amount of exposure students have to these topics is unlikely to result in significant increases in knowledge or understanding. If students are to

study topics as varied as the American Revolution, technological change, suffrage, and racial discrimination, instruction will have to focus specifically on developing their understanding of social institutions such as government and the economy. Without systematic and sustained attention to the role of such institutional factors in human history, students may interpret much of the information they encounter solely in terms of the actions of individuals, and thus fail fully to understand significant aspects of the content they are expected to learn.

APPENDIX

Interview Procedure, Materials, and Protocol

Procedure

Students whose parents consented to their participation were interviewed in pairs in unused rooms of the school. After explaining the nature and purpose of the interview to students, I obtained their written assent and began recording the interviews; the tapes were later transcribed. Students were interviewed using the open–ended protocol below. I began the interviews by presenting students with two pictures from different times in American history, asking them to put them in order, and asking them to talk about the reasons for their placement; the remaining pictures were then presented one at a time. After sequencing all the pictures, students were asked several questions both about the pictures and about their general understanding of history. I frequently probed students' comments at length. Most interviews took between thirty and forty–five minutes.

Materials

During each interview, students used one of the sets of pictures described below. (During some interviews, students looked at various other pictures during an informal discussion, rather than as part of a formal sequencing task.) These pictures were clear reproductions on heavy paper stock, and each measured approximately eleven by seventeen inches. Set A was identical to the set of pictures used in previous research (Barton and Levstik, 1994; Levstik and Barton 1994). Listed below is the order of presentation of each set of pictures, a description of their contents, and the date or origin for each.

Set A

1. Teenagers standing by a convertible, in front of a restaurant (1956)
2. Family standing in front of a covered wagon in a grassy field (1886)
3. Men and women in bathing suits on a beach, in front of a convertible (1924)
4. Political cartoon depicting an urban street scene (1840)
5. Family at home, sewing and reading (1937)
6. Sawmill with colonial soldiers and Native Americans (1772)
7. Urban schoolroom with teacher and children (1899)
8. Large, modern building with people and contemporary cars (1993)
9. Protesters at Pentagon (1967)

Set B

1. Men in early automobiles, in front of buildings (1895 and 1986)
2. Television studio during Kennedy–Nixon debate (1960)
3. Block party in suburban community (1970)
4. Women's suffrage advocates, carrying pamphlets and banners (1913)
5. African–American family in front of small cabin (1862)
6. Immigrants on deck of an ocean liner (1906)
7. Two women in front of early television set (1931)
8. Men cooking outdoors near cattle, horses, and covered wagons (1871)
9. Lincoln and Union army officers in front of a tent (1861)

Set C

1. Column of cavalry and wagons in Dakota Territory (1874)
2. African–American teenager and crowd of whites on a city street (1957)
3. Urban riot with soldiers and large buildings (1844)
4. Display room of an automobile dealership (1910)
5. Family preparing dinner in a kitchen (1940)
6. American and British officers (1816)
7. Immigrants waiting for ferry at Ellis Island (1912)
8. Exterior of passenger jet airplanes (1970s)
9. Soldiers and anti–war protests (1969)

Protocol

I interviewed students using the following open–ended protocol:

1. Here are two pictures from different times. Take a few minutes to look them over. You may not know exactly what is going on in each picture. That is all right. I'm not interested in whether you know exactly what the picture is, but in how you decide how old the picture is or about when the picture could have happened. There are two things I would like you to do with these first two pictures on the table. First, I would like you to put these two pictures in time order. Please start with the picture that is from the longest time ago (point to the child's left), and then put the picture that is the closest to now right here (point to child's right). You can start in just a moment. Second, while you are putting the pictures in order, I would like you to think out loud about why you are putting them in that order. What I mean is, I want you to explain to me what you are thinking while you are doing it. What things in the picture help you to decide which picture happened longest ago, or most recently. Do you have any questions before we start? Remember to tell what you are thinking as you are putting the pictures in order.
2. Now, I have some more pictures. I am going to give them to you one at a time. For each one, tell me where you think it goes—in between two of them, or before or after, or at about the same time as one of them. Explain why you put them where you did, just as you did with the first two pictures. Do you have any questions about what you will be doing?
3. Now that you have done all of them, are there any pictures you would like to move around? If you do, explain to me why you are moving them.
4. [Point to each picture] When do you think this is?
5. Did you think this was easy or hard to do? What things made it easy or hard?
6. Which pictures did you think were the easiest to figure out? Why?
7. Which pictures did you think were the hardest to figure out? Why?
8. Which pictures did you think were most interesting? Why did you like that one [or those]?
9. If you could go back to visit any of these times, which would it be? Why? Which one would you not like to visit? Why?

Now I have some different kinds of questions that aren't just about the pictures.

1. What can you tell me about how things have changed over time? (How were things different a long time ago?)
2. Why do you think those things have changed over time? (Why do you think things were different a long time ago?)
3. Do you think people were different, or acted differently, in the past? Why?
4. How do people find out about how things were different in the past?
5. If someone were trying to find out about the past and got different answers, how could he or she decide what it was really like?
6. What do you think history is?
7. Why do you think history is something people study?
8. Do you like studying history? (Are there any things you've done this year in history that you like or don't like?)
9. Did you ever study history at school before this year?
10. Have you ever learned about history or the past or long ago outside of school?
11. Those are all the questions I have for you. Do you have any questions for me, or any questions about the pictures?

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